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The war in Kosovo and the accompanying ethnic cleansing has catapulted this region to the centre stage of Western attention after so many years of relative silence and indifference. Already in the 1980s, many analysts pointed out that tensions between Albanian and Serbian nationalism and divisions between the Christian Serbs and the (mainly) Muslim Albanians were growing, and were turning the province into a dangerous Balkan hotspot. Comparisons were drawn, especially by Serbian nationalists, with the famous Battle of Kosovo fought between the Ottoman Turks and Balkan Christian forces in 1389 – a ‘clash of civilizations’ between two deeply antagonistic and incompatible nations. In light of the recent developments, it is logical that the rift between Albanians and Serbs is now perceived as a hard and fast line of division. Yet Kosovo has had a history of coexistence, with considerable movement across this ethnic and religious frontier, through economic ties, cultural diffusion, religious exchange and conversion. Throughout history, the ethnic and religious barriers have been anything but watertight.



Circumambulatory procession at the monastery of Zočište

PHOTO: GER DUIJZINGS (1991)

The End of a ‘Mixed’ Pilgrimage

GER DUIJZINGS

Since 1991, I have conducted research on ethnically and religiously ‘mixed’ pilgrimages (in such places as the Serbian Orthodox monasteries of Gračanica and the Roman Catholic shrine of Letnica), which offer clear examples of this contact across religious and ethnic boundaries. At present this seems unimaginable, but until very recently, Muslims and Christians of different ethnic backgrounds visited one another’s sanctuaries, worshipped one another’s saints and ignored the evident theological objections of religious orthodoxies. Particularly in the field of popular religion, which religious authorities traditionally control the least, boundaries were most often disregarded. There are numerous examples in Kosovo (and beyond) where Muslim and Christian forms of pilgrimage and saint veneration have amalgamated and formal religious divisions have become blurred. Most interestingly, in Kosovo, Serbian Orthodox shrines have often demonstrated a propensity to attract Muslim pilgrims of various ethnic backgrounds. The following account deals with one such Serbian shrine, Zočište, which I visited in 1991. Its recent fate somehow symbolizes the breakdown of a shared existence once enjoyed by Serbs and Albanians. It shows that religious *communitas* (Victor Turner), always a precarious matter, can turn into precisely the contrary under certain conditions.

In July 1991, I went to visit Zočište, a mixed Serb-Albanian village three miles from the town of Rahovec, in the southwest of the province. Just outside the village on a hill-top, there is an old medieval Serbian Orthodox monastery (dating from the 14th century or even earlier). Its shrine has a reputation for being particularly helpful in cases of diseases of the eyes and mental and psychosomatic disorders. The church is called Sveti Vrač (the Holy Medics) after the saints Kuzman and Damjan, patron saints of the monastery. My reason for visiting this shrine was that, until the late 1980s, many Muslim Albanians from Zočište and nearby Rahovec would come to the monastery to join the festivities. The story holds that before the Albanian protests of 1989, which were violently suppressed in Rahovec (Orahovac in Serbian), Albanian pilgrims were even more numerous here than Serbs.

Yet in the last few years the growing distrust between Albanians and Serbs put an end to this ‘mixed’ pilgrimage: Albanians had begun to boycott. As I heard from a local Albanian taxi-driver, only a handful of old and very ill Albanians would still make the effort to go to Zočište, and perhaps some Muslim Gypsies, as well as Slav Muslims and Turks from Prizren. In the village itself, relations seemed to have deteriorated, also due to the fact that Albanians had begun to outnumber the Serbian inhabitants. Local Serbs said that they felt they were being pressured into leaving, especially by the strong Albanian clans of the village. The small town of Rahovec was now ethnically segregated, although relations between Serbs and Albanians had been quite harmonious or even

sympiotic before, due to processes of mutual assimilation and absorption. One of the most interesting features of life in this small town was that old urban Albanian families were Slavophone, that is to say, they did not speak Albanian at home, but rather a Slavic dialect (*naš govor* – our tongue). During the 1921 census, the majority of urban Albanians in Rahovec had therefore been registered under the category ‘Serbs or Croats’. During my own research, some asserted that their language was similar to Macedonian, apparently trying to dissociate from any connection with Serbian. Since most Albanians had been sacked from their jobs in 1990, there was now a great deal of ‘bad blood’ between local Serbs and Albanians.

During the pilgrimage, the entrance of the monastery is animated by booths, mainly manned by Gypsies selling snacks and various toys and trinkets; whereas within the confines of the monastery there is an outdoor café run by Serbian youth from the village. There are also other simple, improvised fairground attractions run by Gypsies. During my visit, a Serbian tradesman was selling posters and badges containing images of leading Serbian nationalists like Vuk Drašković, Slobodan Milošević, and Vojislav Šešelj, as well as small Serbian flags and other Chetnik paraphernalia. From the café I could hear old Chetnik songs, and later in the afternoon, down in the village, I saw an Albanian café with Albanian music blaring from the speakers. This was just opposite a Serb marquee emitting even more deafening decibel levels of Serbian songs.

While in 1991 Albanians boycotted the pilgrimage, Gypsies were present in quite

substantial numbers. These were mostly Orthodox or ‘Serbian’ Gypsies (*Srpski cigani*) from Suva Reka and Rahovec who seemed to be quite well assimilated into the Serbian community. During the holiday, Serbs and Gypsies closely intermingled, apparently knowing each other quite well. While I was present, there was also a smaller but quite conspicuous presence of Muslim Gypsy women, wearing the characteristic wide baggy trousers and speaking Albanian, who hardly joined in with Serbs and Orthodox Gypsies; obviously they were not part of the Orthodox *communitas* developing within the walls of the monastery.

Although this was meant to be a feast, the atmosphere was quite tense during my visit: the war had just started and (as a Dutchman) I sensed a great deal of suspicion (at a time when the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hans van den Broek, was heading the European Community efforts to stop the war in former Yugoslavia). At dawn shots were fired, probably by some drunken Serbs, and later that morning army jets flew over, as a reminder to everyone that the situation was far from normal. Suspicion was, however, not only directed against foreigners: I witnessed a Serb pilgrim from Prizren accusing a local peasant of being an Albanian ‘spy’, because of his local dialect, which sounded to him like an Albanian speaking Serbian. After the poor peasant showed his ID to his fellow Serb from Prizren he was told jokingly, but not without serious overtones, ‘You had better change your language if you want us to become friends’. Deep distrust is characteristic of the Serb

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community in Kosovo. After many years of political unrest and ethnic tension, Serbs have developed a strong sense of suspicion – or even outright paranoia – of anyone who appears not to be ‘one of them’.

The highpoint of the religious gathering in Zočište was a circumambulatory procession three times around the church on the morning of July 14, headed by priests and flag-bearers carrying Serbian flags and a banner with an image of the two patron saints. During my visit, most Gypsies remained to the side, clearly showing that the whole event, in this particular place and time, was to be primarily interpreted as a demonstration of Serb presence in Kosovo – amidst a ‘sea’ of Muslim Albanians. It was part of a much wider ‘offensive’ by the Serbian Orthodox Church to strengthen its presence in Kosovo. It is not surprising that during the war, which commenced in spring 1998, the monastery of Zočište became one of its local arenas: on 21 July 1998, it was taken by the Kosovo Liberation Army, the

first Albanian attack on a Serbian Orthodox monastery. According to Serbian sources, the Albanians claimed the monastery as belonging originally to the Albanian Orthodox Church. Seven monks and a nun, as well as a few dozen Serb citizens who had taken shelter in the monastery, were taken hostage. Although they were later released, the monastery remained under Albanian control for several weeks, until it was taken back by Serbian forces. ♦

This text has been drawn and adapted from Ger Duijzings's PhD thesis, Religion and the Politics of Identity in Kosovo, University of Amsterdam, May 1999; forthcoming, London: Hurst, 1999.

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